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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 00858

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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MFA OFFICIAL ON IRAN

¶1. SECRET - ENTIRE TEXT.

¶2. SUMMARY. MFA UNDER SECRETARY SULAIMAN MAJED AL-SHAHEEN FEBRUARY 4 TOLD STATE/CENTCOM BRIEFING TEAM IRAN NO LONGER SHOWED OPEN INTEREST IN SHIA ON THE ARAB SIDE OF THE GULF, BUT MAINTAINED ITS CONTACTS THROUGH "OTHER ORGANIZATIONS". KUWAIT HAS ACCEPTED AN IRANIAN ENVOY, BUT IS RELUCTANT TO RESTORE AIR LINKS. SHAHEEN SAID IRAN STILL HOLDS ABOUT 92 KUWAITI SMALL CRAFT SEIZED FROM FISHERMEN AND PLEASURE BOATERS. HE HOPES FOR NORMALIZATION OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS, BUT SAID THE EXECUTION OF 16 KUWAITI SHIA AFTER LAST YEAR'S MECCA BOMBINGS HAD HAD A NEGATIVE EFFECT BECAUSE TEHRAN STILL HELD ITSELF RESPONSIBLE FOR "SHIA BLOOD". END SUMMARY.

¶3. STATE/CENTCOM BRIEFING TEAM LED BY BRIG. GEN. DREWFS FEBRUARY 4 PROVIDED BRIEFING ON IRAN TO MFA UNDER SECRETARY SULAIMAN MAJED AL-SHAHEEN. THE MEETING WAS ALSO ATTENDED BY MFA AMERICAS DEPARTMENT CHIEF DR. SUHAIL SHUHAIBER, TWO OTHER MFA STAFFERS, DCM, CHUSLOK, AND POLCHIEF. SHAHEEN LISTENED CAREFULLY, ASKED A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS, AND AT THE CONCLUSION EXPRESSED APPRECIATION FOR THE BRIEFING. HE TERMED IT A "SIGN OF THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN KUWAIT AND THE US" AND ASSURED THE BRIEFERS THAT "THE MAIN POINTS WILL FIND THEIR WAY TO HIGHER AUTHORITIES, INCLUDING THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER (SHAIKH SABAH AL-AHMED, WHO DOUBLES AS FOREIGN MINISTER)".

¶4. SHAHEEN OFFERED THE TEAM KUWAIT'S PERSPECTIVE ON IRANIAN DEVELOPMENTS AS WELL. COMMENTING ON RAFSANJANI'S HOLD ON POWER, HE SAID IT WAS DIFFICULT TO TELL IF RAFSANJANI WAS STRONG OR HIS OPPONENTS WERE WEAK. AHMED KHOMEINI CLEARLY HAD LITTLE REAL POWER EXCEPT THE REFLECTED INFLUENCE OF HIS NAME, AND APPEARED TO BE CONCENTRATING NOW ON RELIGIOUS ISSUES (SUCH AS BUILDING HIS FATHER'S SHRINE) RATHER THAN POLITICAL ISSUES.

¶5. THE UNDER SECRETARY SAID KUWAIT HAD INFORMATION THAT THE IRANIANS HAD BEGUN A CAMPAIGN (NOT WITH SUCCESS TO DATE) TO CONVINCE IRANIAN INTELLECTUALS AND TECHNOCRATS IN EUROPE AND THE US TO RETURN. ON IRAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ITS GULF NEIGHBORS, HE SAID ALTHOUGH TEHRAN NO LONGER OPENLY SHOWED INTEREST IN THE SHIA OF THE GULF, IT LIKELY WAS WORKING THROUGH "OTHER ORGANIZATIONS" TO KEEP TIES WITH THE SHIA ON THE ARAB SIDE OF THE GULF. ON SAUDI-IRANIAN TIES, HE SAID KUWAIT HOPED RELATIONS WOULD BE NORMALIZED BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. HE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT THE IRANIANS "STILL HOLD THEMSELVES RESPONSIBLE FOR SHIA BLOOD" AND SAID THE SAUDIS' EXECUTION OF 16 KUWAITI SHIA AFTER THE MECCA BOMBINGS LAST JULY HAD AFFECTED SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS. HE CITED THE KILLING OF THREE SAUDI

DIPLOMATS IN THAILAND IN THIS REGARD.

¶6. ON KUWAIT'S OWN RELATIONS WITH IRAN, HE RECALLED THAT AN IRANIAN AMBASSADOR HAD RECENTLY TAKEN UP HIS POSITION IN KUWAIT AND THAT KUWAIT HAD A CHARGE IN TEHRAN. HE DID NOT DIRECTLY ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF WHETHER/WHEN A KUWAITI AMBASSADOR MIGHT GO TO IRAN. SHAHEEN SAID THE TWO COUNTRIES WERE "STILL TALKING" ON THE ISSUE OF AIR LINKS, BUT THE GOK FEELS "THE AIRSPACE IS STILL NOT CLEAR". THERE WERE OTHER QUESTIONS AS WELL ON WHICH THE GOK HAD NOT HAD A CLEAR ANSWER FROM TEHRAN. HE SAID THE IRANIANS WERE HOLDING ABOUT 92 SMALL BOATS, INCLUDING FISHING BOATS AND SPEEDBOATS. OFTEN, HE SAID, THE BOAT WOULD BE SEIZED AND THE FISHERMEN, USUALLY EGYPTIANS, RELEASED. SHAHEEN SAID THE TEHRAN GOVERNMENT SAYS IT DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THE BOAT SEIZURES "AND WE BELIEVE THEM". HE SAID THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LIKELY DID NOT CONTROL THE ACTIONS OF LOCAL COAST GUARD COMMANDERS. THIS EVIDENT LACK OF CENTRAL AUTHORITY WAS ITSELF A VERY WORRYING SIGN OF RAFSANJANI'S ABILITY, OR LACK THEREOF, TO ESTABLISH AUTHORITY.

¶7. COMMENT. SHAHEEN'S REMARK ABOUT IRAN MAINTAINING ITS TIES TO SHIA THROUGH "OTHER ORGANIZATIONS" BETRAYS CONTINUING GOK CONCERN ABOUT TEHRAN'S MISCHIEF-MAKING ABILITY, DESPITE A THAW IN BILATERAL RELATIONS. "OTHER ORGANIZATIONS" LIKELY MEANS CLANDESTINE SHIA ORGANIZATIONS. THE REFERENCE TO THE 16 KUWAITI SHIA ALSO REFLECTS THE GOVERNMENT'S KEEN AWARENESS THAT THE UPS AND DOWNS IN SAUDI-IRANIAN TIES HAVE AN IMPACT HERE. AS LONG AS THAT RELATIONSHIP IS POOR, IT WILL LIMIT TO SOME EXTENT THE SPEED WITH WHICH KUWAIT CAN IMPROVE ITS OWN RELATIONS WITH TEHRAN -- WHICH, ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, KUWAIT WOULD LIKE TO DO. END COMMENT.

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